

A NOTE ON THE INCIDENCE OF TUDOR SUICIDE

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The publication of a Calendar of Nottinghamshire Coroners' Inquests, 1485-1558 (1969), edited by Dr. R. F. Hunnisett for the Thoroton Society, provides material for some preliminary inquiries into the incidence of suicide in Tudor times. In his most useful introduction, Dr. Hunnisett explains that he hopes to prepare a comprehensive analysis of the inquests after certain missing records have been found, and this will be eagerly awaited. However, a few general comments on one aspect of the material now available may serve to encourage local demographers to hunt out comparable or related documentation, to consider whether evidence from parish registers can be brought to bear on this problem, and to present views on the validity of possible methods of analysis.

Suicide is of course a notoriously difficult subject to investigate statistically. Durkheim's classic sociological study, for instance, is statistically unsound in parts because the author builds theories on the comparison of numbers of recorded suicides in various societies and periods not allowing for the fact that very varying proportions of suicide go unrecorded. It follows that we must not expect too much from our present enquiry. (1.)

The Nottinghamshire inquests are most complete for the years 1530-1558. Dr. Hunnisett has calendared 250 inquests for these years, 35 of which produced a verdict of death due to natural causes, and 40 a verdict of homicide, leaving 175 inquests on misadventure or suicide. (In a handful of cases the verdict is uncertain - the most likely has been chosen). A few inquests related to more than one death, and the total of deaths by misadventure or suicide is 183. Apart from the calendared inquests, Dr. Hunnisett has noted (in his introduction, p. xix) that of twelve King's Bench indictment files of the period which he could not examine because they were then missing,

seven were known to contain Nottinghamshire inquests and only one not: this suggests that ten of the missing files may contain Nottinghamshire inquests. Dr. Hunnisett has recently kindly informed the writer that he has now examined two of the missing files and finds them to contain 10 Nottinghamshire misadventures, 2 suicides and 4 homicides. These figures suggest that the total of missing deaths may be as high as (10 files x 8 deaths in each) = 80 deaths. But possibly the files examined contain an abnormally large number of Nottinghamshire inquests, and possibly more than two of the missing files contain no Nottinghamshire inquests. Cautiously, we shall adopt a lower estimate of (8 files x 6-8 deaths in each) = say, 50-60 deaths. Similarly we estimate the number of missing misadventures and suicides at 8 files x 5 deaths in each) = 40 deaths. (Thus, rather over 20% of Nottinghamshire misadventures and suicides are not calendared.) The total of misadventures and suicides brought to inquest we estimate at 183 + 40 = 223. With regard to homicide, the position is even more complicated. Dr. Hunnisett suggests that the records of inquests on as many as four homicides a year - hence, 116 in the period of 29 years - were involved in the process of gaol delivery, and are now 'irretrievably lost'. The total of homicides may therefore be as high as 40 + (8 x 2 from the recoverable files) + 116 = 172. On these estimates, the total of violent deaths in Nottinghamshire 1530-1558 may have been as high as 395.

Of the deaths calendared or since discovered, 40 were suicides. Allowing for the still missing files, the total brought to inquest in the period we estimate at 38 + (8 x 1) = 46. Thus, suicides probably accounted for about 12% of all violent deaths. Today, the comparable figures is about 25%, but of course there are now far fewer homicides, and probably rather more misadventures: with so many variables involved, the comparison is not very meaningful. It is a little more profitable to measure suicides against violent deaths other than homicide. Of the total of Nottinghamshire deaths from misadventure or suicide, suicide accounted for 46 out of 223, or if we limit ourselves to those whose records are known, for 40 out of 195 - in either case, 21%. The comparable figure today is about 25%. Before jumping to any conclusion, we should note that a century ago, in the 1860's, the comparable figure was about 10%. Obviously this sort of comparison is affected by changes in the incidence of misadventure, as much as by - and often, more than by - changes in the incidence of suicide. It is in fact likely that there were more misadventures (relative to population) in mid-Victorian Britain than either today, or in Tudor times, but we are uncertain how the modern and the Tudor incidences compare. However, while we must be cautious about any

comparison with other times, the fact that one in five of all violent deaths, other than homicide, brought to inquest in Nottinghamshire 1530-1558 was a suicide, gives fairly strong grounds for suggesting that suicide was not only not unknown, but was not uncommon in mid-Tudor England.

The sound way of ascertaining the relative commonness of any form of deaths is, of course, to measure the number of deaths against the total population at risk. This we shall now attempt to do for suicide in mid-Tudor Nottinghamshire. The snag lies inevitably in the difficulty of discovering the size of any pre-nineteenth century British population. It must be borne in mind that the incidences hereafter arrived at are subject to a degree of uncertainty deriving from the uncertainty in the population estimates. We now describe two methods of arriving at an estimate of mid-Tudor Nottinghamshire population: we would welcome from readers comments on these, or additional data which would produce a sounder or closer estimate.

(Method A). The most complete set of Elizabethan muster rolls is for 1573, when only one county return is missing: including an estimate for this county based on returns for neighbouring years, the total muster for the nation is 226,000 and the Nottinghamshire muster is 2,360.⁽²⁾ Calculation for two other less complete years, 1569 and 1580, produce very similar results, and we conclude that the Nottinghamshire muster was almost exactly 1.0% of the national muster. Avoiding the controversial subject of the definition of an able-bodied or musterable man, we simply argue that this same proportion applied to the total national population will give the total population of Nottinghamshire. We take national population c.1600 at the conventional figure of 4-4½ million, and hence estimate the population of Nottinghamshire in the 1570s to have been around 40,000. The course of mid-Tudor population is somewhat uncertain, and therefore, without further adjustment, we take the estimate of around 40,000 to be the figure for average population 1530-1558.

(Method B). The ecclesiastical census of 1676 counted 37,000 communicants and dissenters in Nottinghamshire:⁽³⁾ assuming that these were all the population over 16 years of age, and that they represented 60% of the total population, then the total was about 62,000. (Figures in the 60,000s are also arrived at if the number of hearth-tax 'houses' in the county in 1689 is multiplied by either of Gregory King's extra-London house: person ratios.⁽⁴⁾ For neighbouring Leicestershire, it has been estimated that population increased between the ecclesiastical census of 1563 and that of 1676 in the proportion 100:159.⁽⁵⁾ Applying the Leicestershire ratio to the figure for Nottinghamshire population in 1676 gives a figure for

Nottinghamshire population in 1563 of about 40,000. It is perhaps a little less than wholly coincidental that by either method we arrive at the same figure, and therefore fairly satisfactory; and 40,000 is a helpfully round number. The true figure for Nottinghamshire population 1530-1558 was, we suspect, rather smaller, but if so, the error is on the right side in the context of the argument of this note, since the incidences produced on an estimate of 40,000 will probably be minimising, not exaggerating, the amount of suicide.

On an estimate of 40,000 persons at risk, the incidence of recorded misadventure and suicide in 1530-1558 was 168 deaths per million living p.a. (hereafter abbreviated as pMa), and the incidence of estimated misadventure and suicide was 192 pMa. In the 1860s, the incidence of misadventure and suicide (as recorded by civil registration in England and Wales) was over 600 pMa: today it is 350 pMa.⁽⁶⁾ The comparison at least serves to show that the estimated total of Nottinghamshire misadventures and suicides produces an incidence of the right order. For misadventure alone, the incidences compare as follows: Nottinghamshire 1530-1558, 134 pMa (recorded) and 152 pMa (estimated); England and Wales, 1860s, around 540 pMa; Britain today, around 230 pMa. It is possible that there were in fact less misadventures in Tudor Nottinghamshire than there are today. But it must be assumed that Tudor coroners overlooked a certain number of violent deaths, and that misadventures, particularly the less dramatic kind such as children or old people dying from domestic falls or burns, were especially likely to be overlooked. The relative lowness of the misadventure incidence may be misleading.

The incidence of suicide brought to inquest in Nottinghamshire 1530-1558 was 34 pMa (recorded) and 40 pMa (estimated). Very fortunately, these figures can be compared with others derived from the findings of another scholar. In 1966, Dr. Alan Macfarlane listed all the suicides in the county of Essex for the period 1560-1603 (from the King's Bench records). His valuable detailed analysis remains unpublished, but with his permission we quote the total of suicides for the period, 139. The population of Essex most probably averaged about 85,000 during these years, and on this figure the incidence of suicide was 37 pMa.⁽⁷⁾ If we assume that in the case of Essex, as in the case of Nottinghamshire, a few of the records have been mislaid, then the full Essex rate must be considered in very close agreement with the higher, estimated rate for Nottinghamshire. The agreement goes some way towards proving what we shall henceforth assume, that suicide in Nottinghamshire 1530-1558 was typical of suicide in mid- and late-Tudor England.

The incidence of suicide in mid- and late-Tudor England has just been estimated at 40 pMa. The incidence of suicide in the 1860s was about 65 pMa. Today, the incidence is 120 pMa. Probably all of these figures under-estimate the true incidences. Today, the Scottish Registrar General includes in his annual report a warning that 'instances have come to notice where the clinical history and circumstances of death suggest suicide but where the certificate accepted for statistical purposes did not attribute the death to this cause.' In the 1860s, it was believed that very many suicides were included among the large number of deaths returned as 'found drowned'; today, there are few deaths in this category and it seems likely, for this and other reasons, that fewer suicides are concealed today than ever were before. It is not the purpose of the present paper to investigate Tudor attitudes to suicide - other scholars are known to be engaged on this - but it is common knowledge that in earlier centuries there were legislative and social penalties designed to discourage suicide. The sterner these penalties, directed mainly against the family of a suicide, the more likely would it be for suicides to be concealed. It is possible therefore that more suicides were concealed in Tudor than in Victorian times. It is perhaps significant that of the 38 calendared Nottinghamshire suicides, 19 or half were women. In the nineteenth century, only one fifth of suicides were women, and even today the proportion is only one third. The Nottinghamshire proportion might be explained by excess concealment of male suicide. As Dr. Hunnisett has pointed out (in correspondence), the confiscation of property which was one of the penalties of suicide was generally more serious in the case of a male suicide than in the case of a female suicide, and families would therefore be more inclined to conceal suicides of men. Now if more suicides were concealed in Victorian times than today, and more still in Tudor times, the apparent simple progression shown in the figures at the beginning of the paragraph, the trebling of suicide rates since the sixteenth century cannot be accepted. What the true incidence of suicide in mid-Tudor Nottinghamshire was we shall never know, but it was almost certainly above 40 pMa, and possibly well above. We are inclined to think that it was well below the modern incidence but fairly close to the true mid-Victorian incidence.

But more important than this uncertain comparison with later times is the comparison with earlier times. It is conventionally supposed that suicide was very uncommon in the Middle Ages. This general supposition is supported by a study of the coroners' inquests for Bedfordshire in various years between 1265 and 1317: of 121 misadventures and suicides, only three were suicides.⁽⁸⁾ The

incidence (on an extremely rough calculation) cannot have been more than 6 pMa. In view of the contemporary pressure on families to conceal what was then considered a heinous deed, no doubt the true incidence was higher, perhaps a good deal higher. But if the very low figure testifies to the extreme disapproval of suicide at the time, we must also suppose that the disapproval worked, and that there were in fact relatively few suicides. Between the incidence at inquest of 6 pMa for Bedfordshire c.1280 and the incidence at inquest of 40 pMa (or even 34 pMa, the actually recorded incidence) for Nottinghamshire 1530-1558, there is a striking difference, a difference much greater in degree than the difference between the recorded rate for mid-Tudor Nottinghamshire and the rate for today. While part of the difference between the thirteenth century and the sixteenth century incidences may be accounted for by less concealment at the later date, the remainder must be accounted for by a considerable increase in suicide.

It is impossible to say how much suicide was concealed in Tudor times,⁽⁹⁾ but it is surely significant that a substantial amount of suicide not only occurred but was recorded. While the language of the Tudor inquests condemns suicide, it does so in terms which seem to be formal, conventional and perhaps less than whole-hearted. How extensively other measures (e.g. refusal of church burial) were taken against suicides the writer has no idea, and local historians might care to attempt to find out. But the impression given by the Nottinghamshire inquests is that suicide at the time was fairly common and fairly commonplace. (In the same way, suicide appears almost commonplace in Elizabethan drama.) It was certainly not so lightly regarded as today, but the full-blown medieval horror of suicide seems to have evaporated. The period of the Nottinghamshire inquests, be it noted, is 1530-1558, at the very end of medieval-Catholic England, and most of the persons involved had grown up in a pre-Reformation society. In respect of the calendared inquests, the incidence remains constant from decade to decade, with one third of the suicides in the 1530s. It would appear therefore that a changing attitude to suicide had developed in England before the advent of Protestantism. We hazard a guess that it was the product rather of the 'Christian humanism' of the later Middle Ages. And we suggest that the brief history of suicide in Britain may be a sharp increase in the later Middle Ages, a relatively constant rate since, in the form of a slow increase.

To conclude on a less speculative note. The forms of suicide in mid-Tudor Nottinghamshire were: by drowning 17 (including 11 women), by hanging 14 (5 women), by wounding 6 (3 women), by other means 1. Drowning remained a popular form of suicide up to recent decades,

and as it was also a very common form of accidental death, no doubt many suicides by drowning were not correctly recorded. Of the Nottinghamshire suicides by drowning, 7 died in the family well (the scene also of many deaths recorded as accidental), and of these, 4 were women. For the worn-out and sickly Tudor housewife, the well appears to have been the equivalent of the twentieth-century gas-oven - the domestic chore whose lethal misuse offers release.

NOTES

1. In S.E. Sprott, The English debate on suicide, La Salle (Ill.), 1961, pp. 159-60, the number of suicides recorded in the London bills of mortality is compared at various periods with the number of all recorded deaths, and conclusions are drawn from these calculations about the changing incidence of suicide - erroneously, since the changing incidence of disease is ignored.
2. E.E. Rich, 'The population of Elizabethan England', Economic History Review, 1949-50, pp. 247-65, on p.253.
3. E.C. Guilford. 'Nottinghamshire in 1676', Transactions of the Thoroton Society, 28, 1924, pp. 106-113.
4. D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley, Population in history, 1965, p. 203, n.51; p.218, Table 12.
5. C.T. Smith, V.C.H. Leicestershire, III, pp. 138-9.
6. For 1860s statistics of violence hereafter, see the convenient summary of the Registrar General's reports in C. Walford, 'On the number of deaths from accident, negligence, violence and misadventure in the United Kingdom and some other countries', Journal of the Statistical Society, 44, 1881, pp. 444-527. For today's statistics, see Registrar General's Statistical Review, 1967, Part 1 Tables Medical, Table 8.

7. The figure for Essex has been kindly supplied by Dr. B.W. Quintrell. Dr. Macfarlane also listed all the suicides in England in one year 1584, and the general incidence obtained is lower than the county incidences cited in the text, being only about 20 pMa. This may have been 'a good year' for suicide: alternatively, several counties recorded no inquests on suicides, which in the case of more populous counties might well indicate a policy on the part of the local coroners of overlooking suicides.
8. R.F. Hunnisett, Bedfordshire coroners' rolls, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society vol. XLI, 1961, p. xxiii.
9. For what appears to have been one successful concealment, see J. Miller and K.H. Rogers, 'The strange death of Edward Longford', Wiltshire Archeological and Natural History Magazine, 62, 1967, pp. 103-9.

Pre-1841 Census Enumerators Schedules

In L. P. S. 2 we appealed for information about pre 1841 Census Schedules. The response to this appeal is set out below. We would like to thank those readers who have supplied information and waited so patiently for it to be published.

<u>County</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Parish</u>	<u>Whereabouts of Original</u>
Essex	1821	Braintree	C.R.O.
Kent	1801	Borden	C.R.O.
Kent	1811	Borden	C.R.O.
London	1801	Chelsea	Chelsea Ref. Library
London	1831	St. John at Hackney	Shoreditch Central Lib.
Norfolk	1831	Diss	C.R.O. (Temporary deposit)
Suffolk	1801 & 1831	Ipswich, St. Peter	C.R.O.
Suffolk	1831	Ipswich, St. Margaret	C.R.O.
Surrey	1811	Croydon	Croydon Public Library
Sussex	1811	Kirdford	C.R.O.
Worcestershire	1831	Wolverley	C.R.O.
Yorkshire	(W.R.)1811	Carleton near Skipton	Leeds City Library